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The Journal of the American Newspaper Publishers Association

1992 Election Preview: Endorsements, Political Ads

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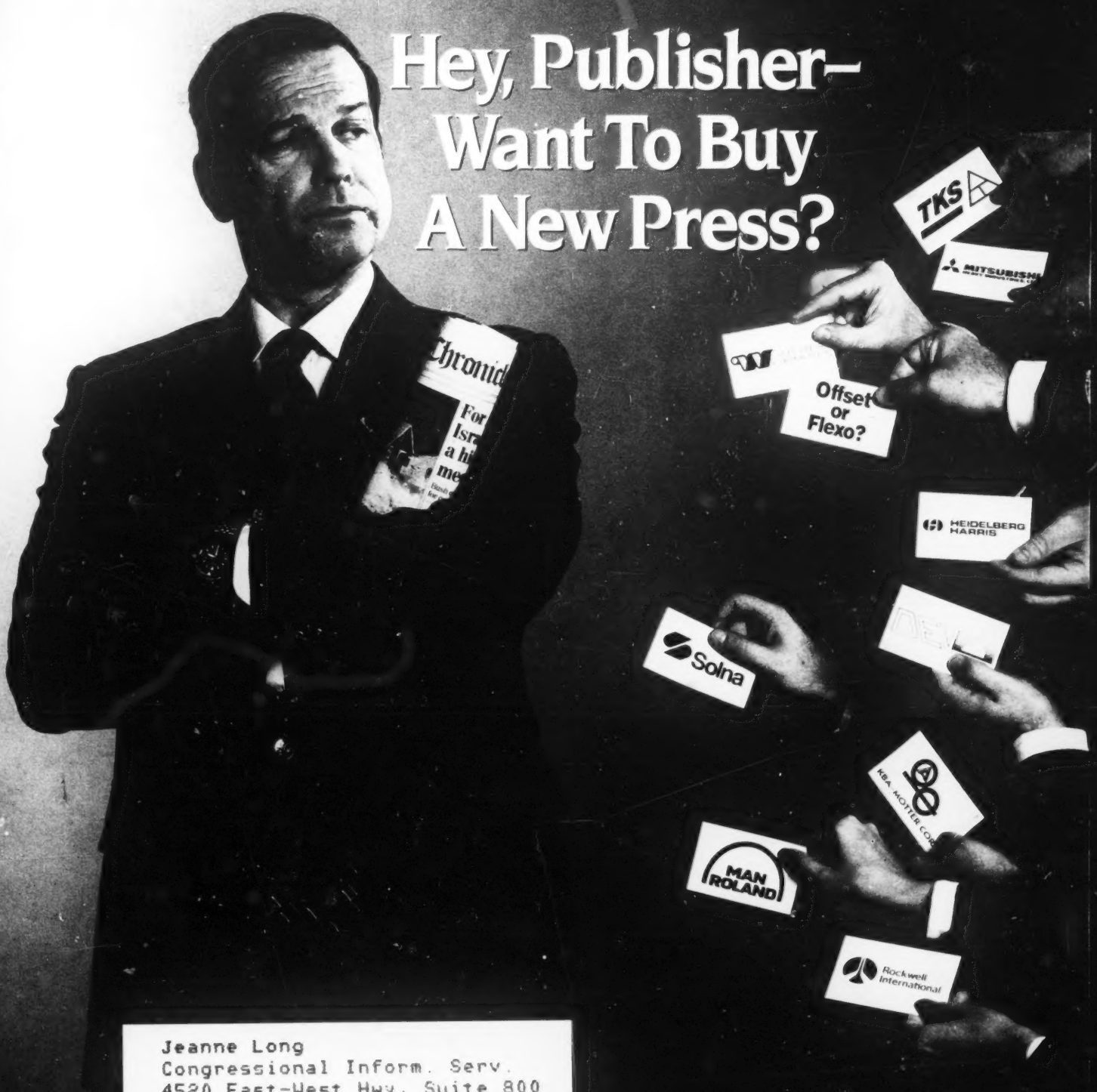

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DECEMBER 1991 VOLUME 13, NUMBER 12

18 Special Report *Irony rules the newspaper press world. Press technology is dazzling, and newspapers can choose from more printing processes then ever before. But sales are virtually non-existent, and press companies are not optimistic for 1992. Meanwhile, the technology continues to mature. Newspapers with new presses can print more color, flexographic presses have become a solid option, and six-page-wide presses or future computer-to-press technology may expand choices even further.*

6 Election '92: endorsements *In 1988, a majority of papers did not endorse a candidate for President. This time more may take a stand.*

10 Election '92: advertisements *A new study delineates why newspapers are consistently overlooked when political candidates are buying advertising.*

26 Environmental audit *Conducting a voluntary inspection can help prepare newspaper employees for the close scrutiny of government regulators.*

28 Above ground *From entertainment-oriented underground weekly to multimedia success story, the Boston Phoenix soared straight to its niche.*

34 Profile: Jerri Eddings *This Baltimore Sun foreign correspondent reports from South Africa through the eyes of a black American.*

35 Essay: Agenda setting *A journalism professor says newspapers can and should establish the issues for the 1992 presidential race—starting now.*

40 Revisiting the First *Does a changing world mean a change in the First Amendment? Delegates at the First Amendment Congress debate the issue.*

44 Community involvement *The last of 12 reports from newspaper think tank New Directions for News describes how to connect with readers.*

46 RBOCs redux *Legislative battles, court tests, ad campaigns, editorials—they're all part of the fight for the electronic information marketplace.*

Editorial Endorsements, p. 6

Special Report, p. 18
(Cover photo by Lightscapes.)

Environmental Audits, p. 26

Advertisers index	63	Employee relations	56	Postal	38
Advertising	48	Government affairs	36	Readership	44
ANPA calendar	62	Minority affairs	39	Speeches	62
ANPA news	63	News-editorial	42	Syndicates	41
Chairman's corner	3	Newspaper business	58	Technology	50
Circulation	45	Newsprint	55	Telecommunications	46
Education	40	Overset	64	World press	39

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Newspapers Must Work

New study shows that many campaign officials choose other media

BY RUTH ANN WEAVER-LARISCY
and SPENCER F. TINKHAM

Many top political consultants and campaign managers steer their congressional clients away from newspaper advertising on grounds that newspapers treat candidates unfairly and deliver questionable impact with voters, a new national study shows.

The study also shows clearly that newspapers must change their ad sales techniques dramatically if they want a larger share of political advertising dollars in the 1992 congressional campaigns.

Those dollars are worth going after: Campaigns for the U.S. Senate and House reported spending $445 million in 1990, according to the Federal Election Commission. Of those dollars, newspapers got just an estimated 7.5 percent—about $33 million.

Weaver-Lariscy and Tinkham are on the faculty of the Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.

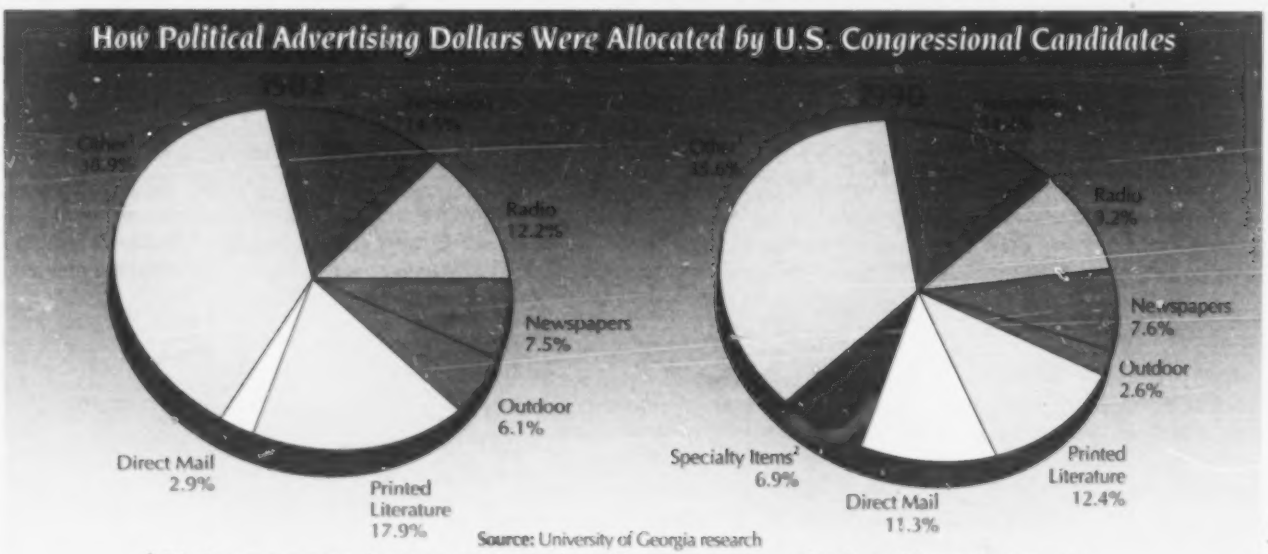
Newspapers can get a larger share next year, but it won't be easy. These conclusions emerge from a survey of candidates and interviews with political consultants.

In the survey, conducted for the University of Georgia's James M. Cox Jr. Institute for Newspaper Management Studies, a questionnaire was mailed to all candidates in competitive races for the U.S. House of Representatives one week after the 1990 election. Usable responses were received from 323 individuals—a 52-percent response rate. Respondents were divided almost equally between Democrats and Republicans, losers and winners. Incumbents and challengers responded in representative proportions to their actual numbers.

Then, earlier this year, 36 in-depth interviews were conducted with political media consultants in Washington, D.C., and at a conference of the American Association of Political Consultants in Williamsburg, Va. The consultants are Democratic and Republican campaign managers/advisers for candidates for the U.S. Senate and House, state houses, and the White House.

The research found strong tendencies to pass over newspapers and make advertising buys instead with television, direct mail (up 300 percent between 1982 and 1990) and, increasingly, cable TV. Here are some specific reasons given:

- Consultants say newspaper ad staffs are arrogant and difficult to work with, sometimes creating the impression that political advertising is beneath their publications' dignity.
- Although they say some newspaper advertising is advisable in most campaigns, many consultants warn candidates against spending much money on it because they don't believe newspaper advertising or news coverage influences voters. Consultants favor the mass impact of television and the target marketing strengths of direct mail.
- In advising candidates to buy at least a little newspaper advertising, some consultants say they believe it will generate favor-


How Political Advertising Dollars Were Allocated by U.S. Congressional Candidates
1982
Other[1] 38.9%
Radio 12.2%
Newspapers 7.5%
Outdoor 6.1%
Printed Literature 17.9%
Direct Mail 2.9%
1990
Other[1] 15.6%
Radio 9.2%
Newspapers 7.6%
Outdoor 2.6%
Specialty Items[2] 6.9%
Printed Literature 12.4%
Direct Mail 11.3%
Source: University of Georgia research
[1]"Other" encompasses non-advertising expenditures such as polling, staff expenses, consulting fees and door-to-door canvassing.
[2]Specialty items include bumper stickers, yard signs, buttons and other items. Category was not included in 1982 questionnaire.

Alberto Pacheco

Hard for Political Ads

because they don't believe newspaper ads have impact with voters

able news and editorial coverage. One consultant avers that only by buying ad space can candidates get fair coverage. Others say buying ad space in newspapers—weeklies and dailies—is advisable early in a campaign to ward off unfavorable coverage.

There is near unanimity among consultants on how newspapers can increase their political ad revenue. Among their suggestions:

- Publish firm policies on acceptance and positioning of political ads to combat a widespread perception that some candidates are treated unfairly. Many consultants, for example, say they suspect selected candidates' ads receive advantageous positioning.
- Devise strategies to attract readers to political coverage, motivating candidates to use the medium more extensively. Several consultants also suggest candidates might assign higher priority to newspapers if they offer same-day publication of paid rebuttals to editorials.
- Realize that newspapers don't detract from their watchdog image by aggressively selling political advertising.

Surprisingly strong negative attitudes toward newspapers emerged from our survey and interviews.

For example, even among those respondents who did use newspaper advertising, more than half (51.5 percent) rated it to be of "no value" or "little value" in their campaigns.

Across the board, television is perceived as preferable to newspapers. Even when asked which medium is more "credible and prestigious," characteristics traditionally assigned to newspapers, respondents rank television higher. Broadcast media as a group—television, radio and cable TV—are ranked higher than newspapers in availability as an advertising medium, ability to target specific audiences and ability to deliver large audiences.

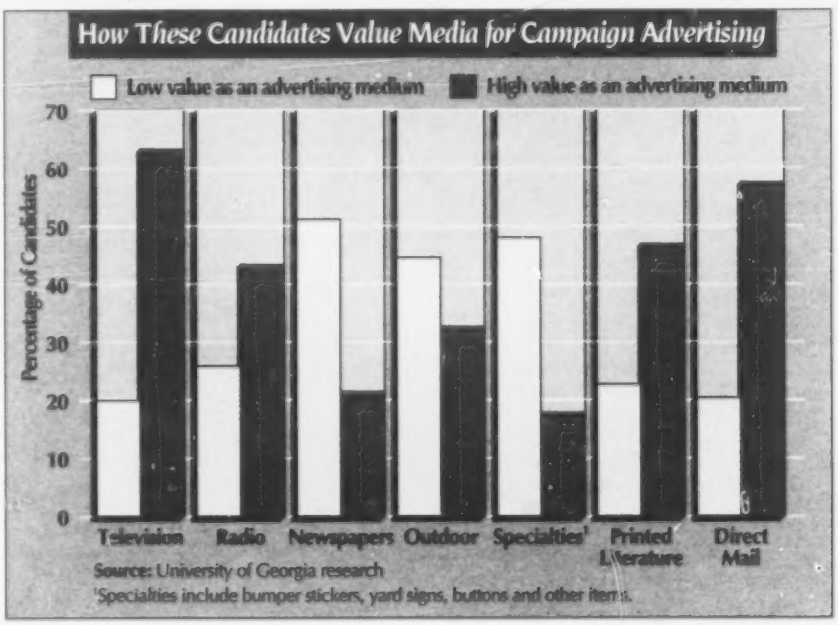
SOUNDING OFF. Various consultants comment bitterly about what they say is newspaper arrogance and inability to deliver impact. Washington, D.C.-based Democratic consultant John Franzen, whose credits include the successful U.S. Senate bids of J. Bennett Johnston and Timothy A. Wirth, says, "There's a certain sense of blackmail involved in virtually all print coverage. With weeklies that are owned by chains, sending them checks affects coverage in several markets."

Political consultants say newspaper ad staffs are arrogant and difficult to work with.

Republican consultant Don Ringe, whose successful efforts from the Washington, D.C., area include gubernatorial races in North Carolina and Florida, and Senate races in Colorado and Indiana, makes similar points: "I'll tell you unequivocally what I and virtually all media persons I know recommend. In a statewide race, first thing we're gonna do is write a whole bunch of checks to every weekly and every local daily . . . for X amount of advertising space. Otherwise they won't print your stuff. It's just that simple."

Democrat Karl Struble, partner in the Struble/Totten firm in Washington, D.C., that successfully represented U.S. Sens. Carl Levin and Thomas A. Daschle as well as U.S. Rep. Timothy P. Johnson, echoes the blackmail theme: "I don't recommend newspaper ads. About the only reason campaigns use newspaper ads . . . and this is not true for your bigger dailies . . . is because it affects their endorsement policy."

Offering a different angle is John Macks of the Washington-based Democratic firm Doak and Shrum, whose clients have included U.S. Rep. Richard A. Gephardt, U.S. Sens. Howard M. Metzenbaum, Paul Simon and Alan Cranston, and Govs. Zell Miller of



Alberto Pacheco

Georgia and Robert P. Casey of Pennsylvania. "I don't think (that newspapers) punish candidates who don't advertise. I think they punish candidates they don't like," he says.

Some consultants describe newspaper advertising as "a waste of time and money" and unable to deliver impact with voters because individual messages get lost in advertising clutter. Struble and several others note that newspapers are an "active" medium, requiring reader effort and thus having limited impact on passive people.

"The problem with newspaper advertising," according to Republican Greg Stevens of The Media Team in Alexandria, Va., (which handled George Bush's presidential campaign as well as several U.S. Senate races), "is that it requires an active participation on the part of the voter, which in this country unfortunately has been reduced to near zero. And unless newspapers can package their political coverage in such a way as to draw people in, there's no point in advertising, from a politician's point of view."

Reflecting nationwide growth of direct mail in political campaigns, many consultants say they need the target marketing strengths of that medium.

"We do use print in a very limited fashion," says adviser John Knapp of Washington-based Squier, Eskew, Knapp, a leading Democratic firm handling presidential and senatorial candidates. "What I've discovered over the years . . . is that we're better off to pull from print and put into cable. Cable has proven to us to be more effective at reaching specific groups."

NEWSPAPERS' STRENGTHS. Despite their criticism of newspapers, consultants and politicians alike say newspapers have strengths in the battle for political ad dollars and can take steps to increase their share.

Among those strengths:

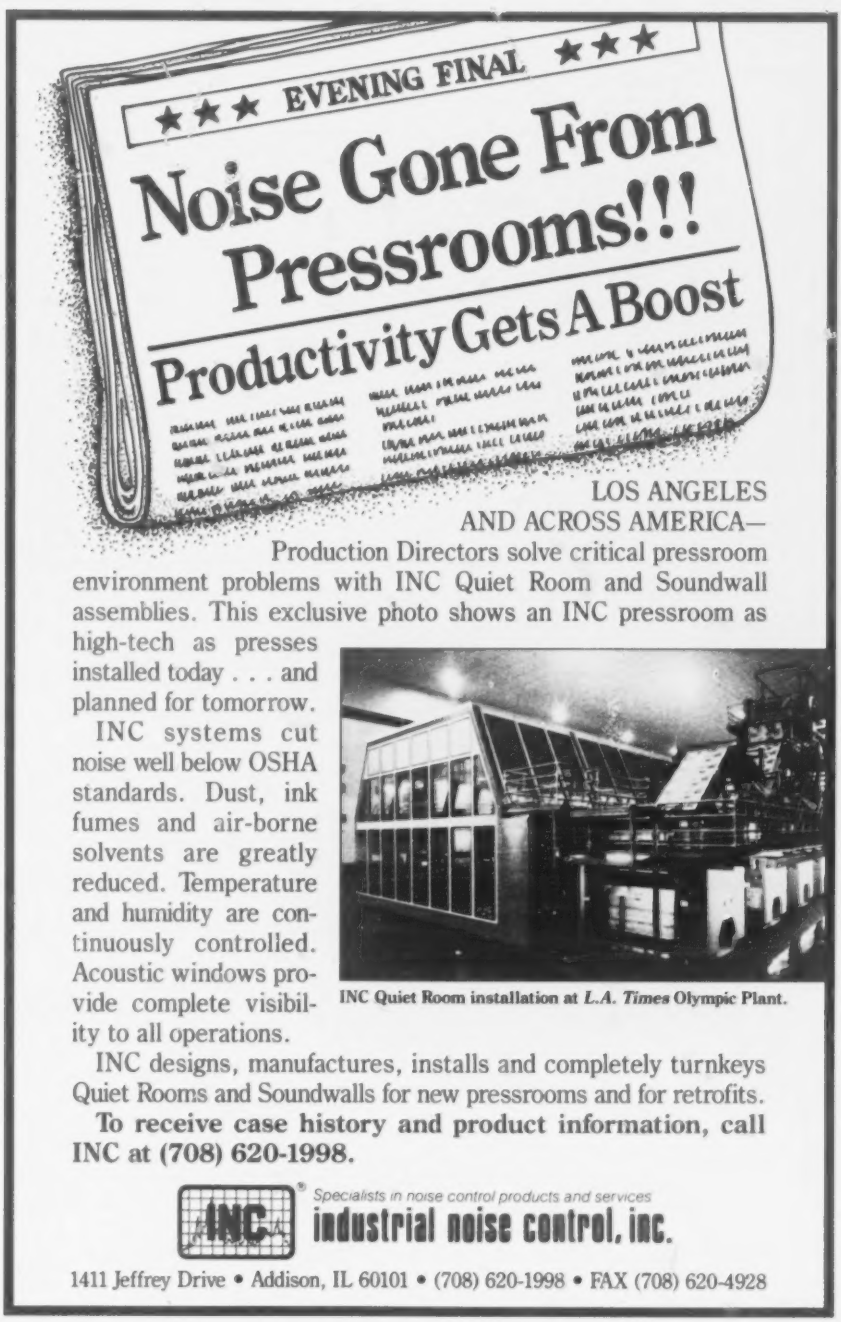
• *Newspaper advertising has impact in local elections.* Says one consultant, "You have to use newspapers for judges, city council, local stuff. But it just isn't worth it in any statewide race."

• *Newspaper advertising is regarded as important for endorsements.* Another consultant sums up the sentiments of several: "There is one kind of newspaper advertising that is worth doing—the very last Sunday before the election. If you can, put together in local papers a substantial list of local endorsements. People have a tendency to go through those lists."

Although several consultants complain that newspaper ad rates are relatively high, cost does not emerge as a reason for negative attitudes toward newspapers. Several consultants, in fact, point out that they willingly pay even higher rates for some TV advertising.

Consultants suggest newspapers can increase their share of political advertising by selling guaranteed placement, whenever possible. They say guaranteeing position next to an article about a candidate would draw substantial ad volume, and that guaranteeing a right of response to an editorial through an ad published the same day would practically force candidates to spend more with newspapers. There was no suggestion that consultants or candidates should have the right of prior review of news or editorial content—only that they be notified of the general nature of what is to be published and that they be given the right to advertise on the same day.

Also suggested: Don't run political ads in bunches. Seeing a political message disappear in a cluster of ads is a turn-off. As for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attempting to sell campaign officials on inserts, don't. Consultants are nearly unanimous in viewing them as a waste of campaign funds.

Rather, consultants say, newspapers should create selling techniques to emphasize these factors:

First, newspapers are most effective in presenting endorsements and allowing candidates to respond to negative ads (on television and elsewhere) and to "set the record straight" when under attack. Ad salespeople should stress this type of advertising. "We do use some print," says Knapp, "usually for negatives that need correcting, setting the record straight. Sometimes we'll use it to provide a record."

Second, ad sales staffs should seek substantial revenue from local groups and independent supporters who can be sold endorsement ads, rather than banking solely on their ability to win larger portions of a candidate's campaign budget.

Equally important, newspaper executives should be aware that there are undercurrents of doubt among candidates and their advisers that newspapers are doing enough to pull readers into stories about political races or to make their editorial op-ed pages attractive forums where political issues are thrashed out.

Consultants suggest strategies to counter reader disinterest—and inspire candidates to use the medium more extensively.

One suggests newspapers develop "ad watch" columns that critically examine a candidate's advertising in all media, then invite paid rebuttal by the candidate or consultant.

Several other consultants *invite* critical dissection of their candidates and campaigns—and would pay for the right to respond.

Some suggest that newspapers pair up with local broadcast stations in regular, critical examinations of candidates, thereby generating greater voter interest. "That would encourage me to advertise, because I'd know that the best voters out there would be reading those stories," one says. "If I know they're critiquing my stuff, I'll be more inclined to buy space that day—close by, not over in the food section." □

> *"First thing we're gonna do is write a whole bunch of checks to every weekly and every local daily . . . for X amount of advertising space. Otherwise, they won't print your stuff."*
>
> Don Ringe
> Washington, D.C.-area political consultant

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January
Special Report: Economic Outlook

In our annual forecast and analysis, newspaper business experts take a look at the economic environment—where we've been and where we're going.

(Additional distribution at the International Newspaper Advertising and Marketing Executives winter meeting Jan. 19-22 in San Diego.)

Deadline for orders: Dec. 6
Ad material close: Dec. 13

February
Special Report: Newspaper Photographers

Their world is rapidly changing, as photo imaging technology begins to replace tedious darkroom procedures. But few newspapers are ready to give up traditional printmaking.

(Additional distribution at the ANPA Pre-Press Technology Symposium Feb. 23-24 and at the ANPA/Newspaper Personnel Relations Association Human Resources Conference Feb. 26-29 in Orlando.)

Deadline for orders: Jan. 3
Ad material close: Jan. 10

March
Special Report: Syndicates Branch Out

Companies that supply syndicated features to newspapers are offering an array of new products. How is the marketplace changing, and why?

(Additional distribution at America * East March 25-27 in Hershey, Pa.)

Deadline for orders: Feb. 7
Ad material close: Feb. 14

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John McCarthy at (805) 498-9969 in Thousand Oaks, Calif.;
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